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## **We Need More Female Plumbers**

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### **There's a labor shortage, but are we ignoring more than half of the population?**

Thirty years ago, women made up less than 1 percent of the construction trades' work force. It is the year 2000, and that percentage has only grown to 2.3 percent. In this day of low "man" power yet ever-increasing workload, today's business owners need to expand their recruiting efforts to meet their labor needs from a previously untapped source - one that makes up more than half the nation's population. For this article, we took a closer look at what is attracting women to the industry, what's keeping them away and what employers can do to draw more women to the trade.

### **What A Girl Wants**

In December of 1993, with her degree in advertising in hand, Niki Rinaldini of Sun City, Ariz., still couldn't find a job in her field.

"I never would've dreamed I'd be a plumber," Rinaldini laughs as she tells the tale of how, tired after two years of searching for a way to put her degree to use, she applied at a plumbing union and quickly got a job running parts. "I liked it, and stuck with it, and eventually learned on-the-job."

Rinaldini, at only 5 foot, 2 inches tall and 105 pounds, admits being a woman plumber is not the easiest thing in the world. "Women have to have a certain temperament to succeed in this industry. They need to be able to draw the line between men and women and still be able to gain respect from the men they work with, and talk and work on their level."

The plumbing industry offers women like Rinaldini a chance at a decent living with good benefits, and the chance to prove they can accomplish something most people say they can't - or shouldn't. "Give me a job to do and I'll do it," says Rinaldini. "Men still take one look at my size and say, 'What is this little girl gonna do?' and then I show them."

Whether it's working long hours on a commercial new construction site or installing heavy water heaters and softeners, Rinaldini isn't one to back down from a challenge - even if that means going head-to-head with an intimidating foreman.

"I ran into some [harassment] problems from one journeyman as an apprentice - some sexual innuendoes and comments such as 'Women should be barefoot and pregnant' and the like. It got to the point where I had to quit, because no one has to put up with that sort of stuff on the job."

After taking a year off, she decided she still enjoyed the trade and pursued a job with Imcor.

"They treated me well. They gave me my own crew after three months, and though not all the men liked to be told what to do by a woman, I gained their respect when I showed I could handle the job. I liked the freedom and trust they gave me."

The ability to be in charge is an extremely attractive benefit employers can offer women to draw them to the trade. Just ask Jan Ashford, owner of service company Jan Ashford Plumbing Inc. for almost 30 years.

"I had goals. I wanted to be the best contractor in Phoenix," Ashford says. "I'm pretty pleased with what I've done. I've proved to people what they thought I couldn't do."

In 1972, the divorced Ashford bought the once flailing company from her ex-husband. With little experience in plumbing or business in general, Ashford says she had the desire to succeed. She learned her skills on-the-job and never really received any formal training. "The banks wouldn't even talk to me, but I just knew I didn't want to work for someone else. I wanted to be an owner," she remembers. "Money doesn't matter, though. If you have the desire, you borrow or do without to get ahead."

Jan Ashford Plumbing - about \$125,000 in debt just 13 years ago - now makes roughly \$2 million a year and sports 20 employees and numerous service trucks.

What does she think of women in the industry? "I was never a 'women's libber' or have been intimidated by men in the industry," Ashford says. "It doesn't pay to say 'Poor me, what do I get?' What I've done, I've earned. No one's handed it to me. I do honest, fair work, and that's what people remember me for."

She does acknowledge that schooling and training for women interested in the trades is lacking in this country. She visits grade schools for career days, reaching about 600-800 students, and still she doesn't see a work force out there.

"It's just not being communicated to young people that they can learn the skills and make as much as or more than someone with a college degree. There is always work available in this industry, but we need to start vocational training young."

Ashford has decided to take on the task herself and is planning an apprenticeship school for women in her area to provide training and education to prepare them for the industry. Without

divulging too many details, Ashford says that women's associations will promote the school, and factory reps will teach the students.

"I've accomplished something going to the schools," says Ashford of her success so far with communicating the benefits of the trade to others. "A lot of these kids won't go to college. I've showed them there's a living out there for them."

### **What A Girl Needs**

According to the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, there were 540,000 plumbers in America in 1999, with approximately 10,000 of that number being female. However, there still are few organizations or schools that cater to promoting women in the industry.

Almost 20 years old, the Chicago Women in Trades organization graduates nearly 50 women a year from its 12-week, pre-apprenticeship training course. Offered twice a year, the CWIT process prepares future industry females with the math, vocabulary, physical fitness, and spatial and technical skills to send them out into the workforce. Its teachers include fellow tradeswomen since, according to policy director Lisa Kuklinski, women apprentices suffer from a lack of mentors. "Women interested in entering the trades need to see themselves in their mentors in order to believe they can do the work," says Kuklinski.

Most CWIT members are in their late-20s to early-30s and have been through the "pink-collar ghetto." Kuklinski says today's tradeswomen are ready to take on a job that offers benefits and higher pay.

CWIT acknowledges that the number of women entering the industry has been slow moving, but it continues to work to increase the awareness of job openings to women willing to tackle the trade.

"Plumbing especially is hard to get into because an opening for an apprentice may appear every two years," Kuklinski points out. CWIT can take its members only so far before it becomes up to the employers and unions whether or not they will accept a woman on their jobsite.

The road to recognizing women as a labor source, however, is not without its obstacles.

A recent survey by CWIT for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration says that safety and health problems in construction continues to create barriers for women wishing to enter and remain in the industry.

The prevalence of hostile work environments, restricted access to tools and protective clothing, and poor on-the-job training were found to be significant issues that impacted a woman's ability to perform her job safely.

"Women are still facing discrimination and harassment on the job," assures Kuklinski. "I mean, it's the year 2000 and I thought we were way beyond that, but it still creates a problem."

Some specific grievances CWIT members have reported include being given the "easier" tasks by a journeyman, such as running equipment from a truck or holding tools while a male apprentice counterpart continuously receives the proper hands-on training. Also, nearly 88 percent surveyed reported being exposed to blatant sexual harassment from other workers and even supervisors.

"It's not an 'evil plot' by men to keep women out of the trades," says Kuklinski of the gender discrimination women face on work sites. "But it's still a new place for women to be."

Many of the problems women face can be changed through engineering and behavioral or administrative intervention. CWIT offers several recommendations to employers if they want to attract women to the trades:

- Bring women together. Hiring more than one woman automatically gives female workers someone to relate to on the job, says Kuklinski. Nearly 22 percent of CWIT members surveyed said they had never worked with another woman. Studies have shown that gender isolation in the workplace can add to an increase in vulnerability and may affect job performance.
- Let leadership trickle down. Employers need to have a sexual harassment policy on the books, and they need to let it be known that discrimination is unacceptable in the workplace. Employers also should have channels of communication open to all employees for reporting health and safety issues. This benefits all workers.
- Offer flexibility in work hours. Again, this isn't gender specific. An employer's commitment to his workers' private lives without jeopardizing their jobs shows a genuine consideration that helps the work environment as a whole.
- Provide a "woman-friendly" work environment. This includes sanitary and accessible bathrooms, proper-fitting safety and work attire, and tools and equipment designed with women in mind. Even the hardware industry is paying closer attention to the needs of women workers by creating tools with smaller grips and work gloves in various sizes.

"We're not asking contractors to do anything special for women. CWIT keeps a positive focus on how the trades can support women and still make the whole workplace healthier and safer for everyone."

The conclusion of CWIT's study showed that improving work conditions for women in the industry not only ensures their health and safety, but it also serves to attract and retain women as workers during this critical time of labor shortage.